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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000027

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ES](#)
SUBJECT: ARENA SEES ELECTION OPPORTUNITIES, BUT HAS
REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

REF: SAN SALVADOR 00002

Classified By: The Ambassador, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: (Conservative, pro-U.S.) ARENA Vice President for the 2009 Campaign Cesar Funes (no relation to (left-wing) FMLN presidential candidate Mauricio Funes) tried to demonstrate optimism to Poloffs about the upcoming Salvadoran legislative, municipal, and presidential elections. He predicted a close mayoral race in San Salvador, giving the ARENA candidate a good chance of victory. He outlined ARENA's best chances to gain seats and its chief geographic areas of concern for the January 18 legislative elections, predicting that both ARENA and the FMLN would finish with 34 or 35 of the 84 seats. Funes acknowledged ARENA's deficit in the March presidential elections, laying full blame on the economy for the party's current predicament. He denounced FMLN leadership, saying it was not ready to lead El Salvador. Funes attempted to convey confidence, but his body language and delivery betrayed his words, and he clearly displayed anxiety about ARENA's electoral chances. End Summary.

12. (C) On January 8, ARENA Vice President for the 2009 Campaign Cesar Funes told Poloffs that ARENA is optimistic about the upcoming legislative and municipal elections. He acknowledged ARENA's deficit in the polls in San Salvador, but noted that in the past four elections, ARENA has gained substantial ground in the capital during the month leading up to the elections. Funes said the race will be close, but that ARENA mayoral candidate Norman Quijano has run a strong, tireless campaign, and liked his chances on January 18.

13. (C) Funes also broke down ARENA's possibilities in the legislative elections. He said that the departments of Cabanas, La Union, and La Libertad represent ARENA's greatest risk of losing seats. Conversely, he cited San Salvador, Sonsonate, Morazan, and La Paz as areas of opportunity for ARENA. Funes noted that the (center-left) Party for Democratic Change (CD) was likely to lose its seats in San Salvador and La Paz, and that those two seats would be hotly contested between ARENA and the FMLN. In both Sonsonate and Morazan, Funes said ARENA had the potential to add a Deputy.

14. (C) While the potential to gain seats is there, Funes said it is very likely that both ARENA and the FMLN would finish with 33 or 34 seats. (Note: ARENA currently holds 34 to the FMLN's 32. End note.) He acknowledged that the FMLN has been ahead in the polls (estimated to win up to 37 or 38 seats), but that the polls significantly underrepresent the smaller parties, which are favored by the Salvadoran electoral framework (reftel). He said that this difference could detract slightly from the FMLN's projections, thereby evening out the total number of seats held by ARENA and the FMLN. Funes also noted that the unpredictability inherent in the residual system of determining legislative seats makes it difficult to predict results with certainty, as a small number of votes can have a large effect.

15. (C) On the presidential front, Funes was not as

optimistic. He said ARENA's current deficit (probably more than 10 points) was entirely the fault of the economy; with or without FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes' presence in the race, the economy would have placed ARENA in its current unenviable position. Funes mentioned that this is not entirely fair, as under ARENA's watch, El Salvador has made incredible progress in the past twenty years, especially when compared to other countries in the region. He said the FMLN is not ready to run the country, and added that they would be dangerous in power, claiming FMLN ties with Nicaragua and Iran. However, Funes said ARENA is not without hope, and that the January 18 legislative and municipal elections would have a great effect on the March presidential elections.

16. (C) Comment: Funes' presence did not impart the same confidence as his words. He seemed to be trying to convince himself of ARENA's chances as much as he was trying to convince us. He raised important points, though, and the possibility remains that the FMLN may not have as strong a showing in the legislative and municipal elections as the polls would suggest. However, such a result could be counterproductive for ARENA's hopes for the presidency. A convincing FMLN legislative victory may be the last chance of jolting the voter base back in ARENA's favor.
GLAZER